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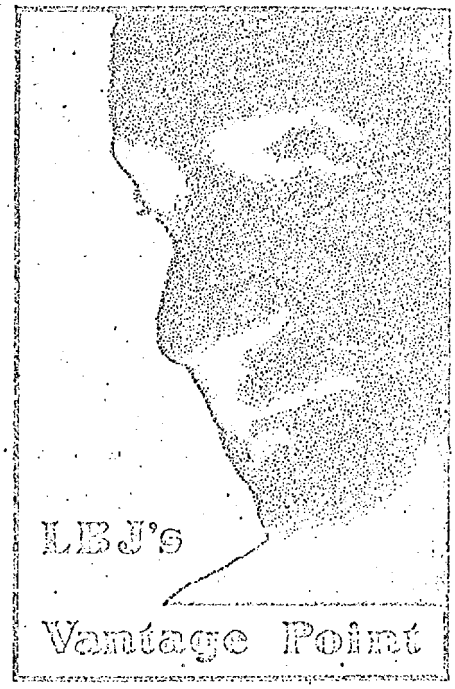
Johnson, Lyndon
C.I.A. or McCone, John
Sec. 4.01.2 The Vantage Point
C.I.A. 3.03 Vietnam, S
Ov. under Johnson

The Ultimatum to Diem 'Was a Serious Blunder'

This is the second of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.



"STEADY ON COURSE: VIETNAM: 1963-1964"

As Air Force One carried us swiftly back to Washington after the tragedy in Dallas, I made a solemn private vow: I would devote every hour of every day during the remainder of John Kennedy's unfulfilled term to achieving the goals he had set. That meant seeing things through in Vietnam as well as coping with the many other international and domestic problems he had faced. I made this promise not out of blind loyalty but because I was convinced that the broad lines of his policy, in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, had been right. They were consistent with the goals the United States had been trying to accomplish in the world since 1945.

My first exposure to details of the problem of Vietnam came forty-eight hours after I had taken the oath of office. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge had flown to Washington a few days earlier for scheduled conferences with President Kennedy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and other administration officials.

Lodge was optimistic. He believed the recent change of government in Saigon was an improvement. He was hopeful and expected the new military leaders to speed up their war efforts. He stated that our government had put pressure on the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem to change its course. Those pressures, he admitted, had encouraged the military leaders who carried out the coup on November 1, 1963. However, if Diem and his brother Nhu had followed his advice, Lodge said, they would still be alive. In his last talk with Diem on the afternoon of November 1, Lodge had offered to help assure the Vietnamese leader's personal safety, but Diem had ignored the offer.

I turned to John McCone and asked what his reports from Saigon in recent days indicated. The CIA Director replied that his estimate was much less encouraging. There had been an increase in Viet Cong activity since the coup, including more VC attacks. He had information that the enemy was preparing to exert even more severe pressure. He said the Vietnamese military leaders who carried out the coup were having difficulties organizing their government and were receiving little help from civilian leaders. McCone concluded that he could see no basis for an optimistic forecast of the future.

President Kennedy's principal foreign affairs advisers agreed that it was important to underline, especially within government circles, the continuity of policy and direction under the new President. I agreed and on November 26 approved National Security Action Memorandum 273. It was my first important decision on Vietnam as President, important not because it required any new actions but because it signaled our determination to persevere in the policies and actions in which we were already engaged.

NSAM 273, addressed to the senior officers of the government responsible for foreign affairs and military policy, began:

It remains the central objective of the United States in South Vietnam to assist the people and Government of that country to win their contest against the externally directed and supported communist conspiracy. The test of all U.S. decisions and actions in this area should be the effectiveness of their contribution to this purpose.

When a President makes a decision, he seeks all the information he can get. At the same time, he cannot separate himself from his own experience and memory. This is especially true when his decisions involve the lives of men and the safety of the nation. It was natural, as I faced critical problems during those first few months in office, that I should recall crises of the past and how we had met them or failed to meet them. No one who had served in the House or Senate during the momentous years of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, as I had, could fail to recall the many highs and lows of our performance as a nation. Like most men and women of my generation, I felt strongly that World War II might have been avoided if the United States in the 1930s had not given such an uncertain signal of its likely response to aggression in Europe and Asia.

The spirit that motivated us to give our support to the defense of Western Europe in the 1940s led us in the 1950s to make a similar promise to Southeast Asia. The Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty was signed in Manila on September 8, 1954, by representatives of seven countries—Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, and the United Kingdom—as well as the United States.

The Senate then approved the treaty by a vote of 82 to 1. The only dissenting voice was that of Senator William Langer of North Dakota, a long-time opponent of the United Nations, NATO, and other forms of U.S. involvement in the world. Among my old Senate colleagues who gave their advice and consent to SEATO that day were Aiken and Case, Fulbright and Gore, Mansfield and Morse.

I respect a Langer, even if I disagree heartily with him, when he argues against our having any involvements in Europe or Asia or the rest of the world—and votes his convictions. I respect far more an Eisenhower or a Kennedy who sees our responsibilities in the world and acts to carry them out. I have little understanding for those who talk and vote one way, and after having given our nation's pledge, act another; for those who stand firm while the sun is shining, but run for cover when a storm breaks. The protection of American interests in a revolutionary, nuclear world is not for men who want to throw in our hand every time we face a challenge.

The failure to obtain North Vietnamese compliance with the Laos Accords of 1962 was a bitter disappointment to President Kennedy.

There was another reason the modest successes of late 1962 were not enlarged and multiplied in 1963. This was internal disruption inside South Vietnam in opposition to the Diem government and, especially, in fearful reaction to Diem's brother Nhu, who was quietly taking the levers of power into his own hands.

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